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THE VORTEX
A Play in Three Acts
By
NOEL COWARD

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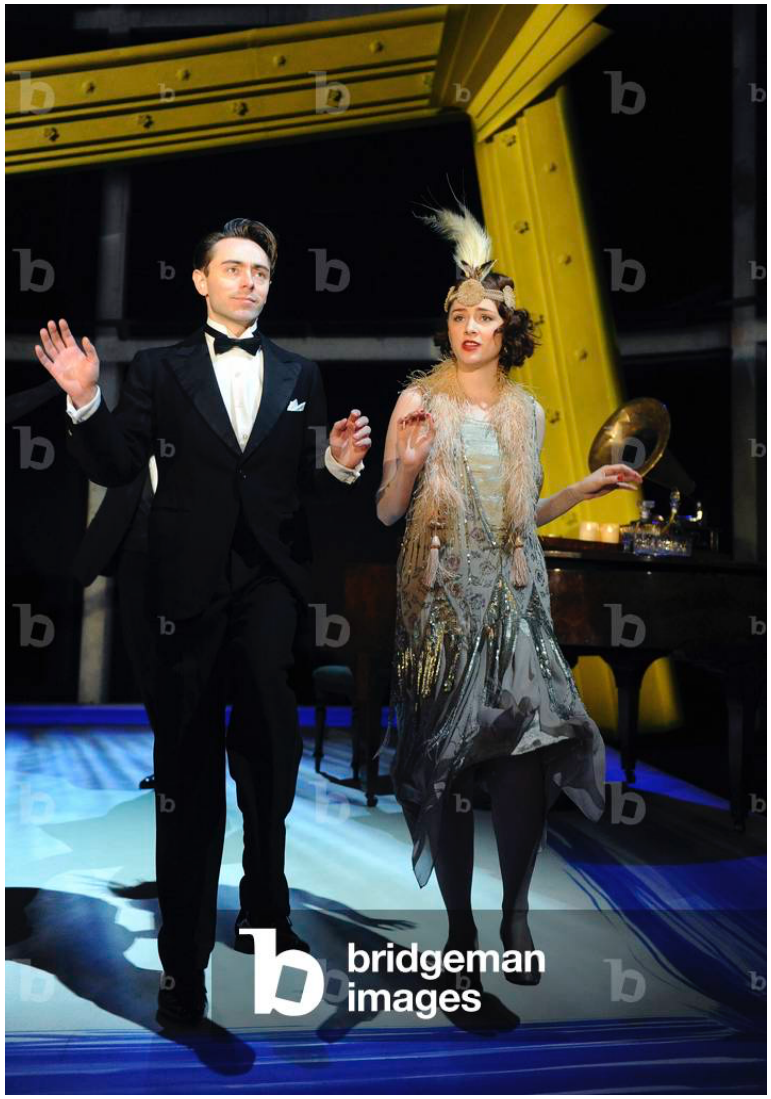

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

- **PRESTON**
- **HELEN** Saville
- **PAWNIE** Pauncefort Quentin
- **CLARA** Hibbert
- **FLORENCE** Lancaster
- **TOM** Veryan
- **NICKY** Lancaster
- **DAVID** Lancaster
- **BUNTY** Mainwaring
- **BRUCE** Fairlight

THE VORTEX
ACT I

The scene is the drawing-room of Mrs. Lancaster's flat in London. The colors and decoration are on the verge of being original. The furniture is simple but distinctly expensive.
Persons shown are Helen Saville and Pauncefort Quentin who are shown in by Preston. Helen is a smartly dressed woman of about thirty, of gay persuasion. "PAWNIE" is an elderly gay gentleman.

PRESTON
I'm expecting Mrs. Lancaster in at any moment now, ma'am.

HELEN
Thank you, Preston, we'll wait a little.

PRESTON
Shall I get you some tea?

HELEN
No, thanks, we've already had some—give me a cigarette, Pawnie; they're in that box on the table.
[Pawnie hands Preston the cigarette box.]

PAWNIE
It may be tiresome of me, but I think all this coloring is oppressive.

HELEN
You make such a "fetish" of house decoration, Pawnie.

PAWNIE [Wandering round the room]
Not at all,... but I do like things to be good and right.

HELEN
Well, I don't consider the new frieze in your bathroom either good or right.

PAWNIE
How can you, Helen! It's too marvelous for words. Parelli designed it specially for me.

HELEN
Personally, it would make me self-conscious to sit in a bath surrounded by frisky gods and goddesses all with such better figures than mine.

PAWNIE
I find it encouraging. This whole room is so typical of Florence.

HELEN
In what way?

PAWNIE
Every way. Look at the furniture.

HELEN
A little artificial perhaps, but quite harmless I guess.

PAWNIE
My Dear Helen, you're such a loyal friend.

HELEN
I'm very fond of Florence.
PAWNIE
We all are. Oh, my God, will you look at that lampshade!
HELEN
Yes, I gave it to her last Christmas.
PAWNIE
Wasn't that a little naughty of you?
HELEN
I don't see why its naughty...; it's extremely pretty.
PAWNIE
But Too unrestrained. Such a bad example for the servants.
[He takes up a frame from desk.] Who's this boy?
HELEN
Oh, thats Tom Veryan. You must have seen him.
PAWNIE
Oh, REalllly? Florence's past, present, or future?
HELEN
Present.
PAWNIE
Well, He has that innocent look that never fails to attract elderly women.
HELEN
Don't be such a cat, Pawnie!
PAWNIE
I wasn't meaning Florence; she's too divine to be in any marked category.
HELEN
Hmmm... I wonder. Yes I wonder what category she's in...
PAWNIE
Oh, yes, Helen, a deathless sort of magnetism, you know.
HELEN
I often wonder what will happen to Florence eventually.
PAWNIE
My dear, I'm far too occupied in wondering what's going to happen to me to worry about other people. **HELEN**
Hmmm, I've always thought your course was quite clear, Pawnie.
PAWNIE
However offensive that remark was intended to be, Helen, I shall take it in the most complimentary spirit.
HELEN
I'm sure you will.
PAWNIE
I expect Florence will just go on and on, then suddenly become quite beautifully old, and go on and on still more. [sigh]
HELEN
It's too late now for her to become beautifully old, I'm afraid. She'll just have to be young indefinitely.
PAWNIE
I don't suppose she'll mind that, but it's trying for David, I know.
HELEN
And fiendish for Nicky. Son's dote on Mothers you know... Nicky certainly does.
PAWNIE
Oh, no, my dear; you're quite wrong there. I'm sure Nicky doesn't care a damn.
HELEN
It's difficult to tell with Nicky.

PAWNIE
He's divinely selfish; of course, all amusing people are.
HELEN
Did you hear him play in Paris?

PAWNIE
Yes.
HELEN
Well?
PAWNIE
Well, Erratic—one or two things perfect, but he's slovenly at the keyboard. Can't focus too long.
HELEN
He only takes things seriously in spurts, but still he's very young.
PAWNIE
Do you really think that's a good excuse.
HELEN
No, I'm afraid not, especially when so much depends on it.
PAWNIE
What does depend on it?
HELEN
Of Course! Everything—his life's happiness!
PAWNIE
Don't be so terribly intense, dear.
HELEN
It's true.
PAWNIE
I'm quite sure Nicky will be perfectly happy as long as he goes on attracting people; he loves being attractive.
HELEN
Naturally, he's Florence's son.
PAWNIE
Oh Yes, such an exciting thing to be.
HELEN (cynically)
You don't believe Nicky's got anything in him at all, do you?
PAWNIE (lightly)
I don't think it matters, anyway.
HELEN
Well.... I do!
PAWNIE
But you've got a loving nature, Helen. I always feel it.
HELEN
Nicky hasn't had a chance.
PAWNIE
Nonsense—he's had everything he wanted ever since the day he was born, and he'll go on wasting his opportunities until he dies.
HELEN
Quite possibly.
PAWNIE
Well, there you are then.
HELEN
He may have had everything he wanted, but he's had none of the things he really needs.
PAWNIE
Are you talking socially or spiritually?
HELEN (sarcastic)
You're quite right, Pawnie, you wouldn't be so beautifully preserved if you'd wasted any of your valuable time on sincerity.

PAWNIE
I forgive you for that, Helen, freely.
HELEN
Thank you so much.
PAWNIE
You must realize one thing, everyone is sacrificed to Florence—it's as it should be—of course, she's a couple of hundred years too late—she ought to have been a flaunting, intriguing King's mistress, with black page boys and jade baths and things too divine——
PRESTON [Announcing]
Miss Hibbert.
[Enter Clara Hibbert—she is affected, but quite well-dressed. Preston goes out.]
CLARA
My dears. Isn't Florence back yet?
HELEN
No, we're waiting for her.
PAWNIE
You look harassed, Clara.
CLARA
I **am** harassed.
HELEN
Why?
CLARA
I'm singing to-night for Laura Tennant—she's giving a dreadful reception at her dreadful house for some dreadful Ambassador——
PAWNIE
How dreadful!
CLARA
No one will listen to me, of course—they'll all be far too busy avoiding the Cup and searching for the Champagne.
HELEN
What are you singing?
CLARA
One Gabriel Faure, two Reynaldo Hahn's and an Aria.
PAWNIE
Which Aria?
CLARA
I can't think, but my accompanist will know—I've got a frightful headache.
HELEN
Why don't you take off your hat?
CLARA My dear, I daren't—I've just had my hair done—I suppose you haven't got a "Cachet Faivre," either of you?
HELEN
No, but Florence has, I expect—Preston will know where they are—ring the bell, Pawnie.
PAWNIE [Ringing bell]
My poor Clara—I do hope your singing to-night will justify the fuss you're making this afternoon.
CLARA
Don't be so brutal, Pawnie.
HELEN
Is Gregory going with you?
CLARA
Helen Of course—I never sing unless he's there—he gives me such marvelous moral support.
PAWNIE
"Moral" is hardly the word I should have chosen, dear.
[Enter Preston.]

HELEN
Do you know if Mrs. Lancaster has any “Cachet Faivre” anywhere?
PRESTON
Yes, ma’am—I think so.
CLARA
Do get me one, Preston, I’m suffering tortures.
PRESTON
Very well, miss.
[Preston goes out.]

PAWNIE
Preston has such wonderful poise, hasn’t She?
HELEN
She needs it in this house.
CLARA
I do wish Florence would hurry up. I want to borrow her green fan. I’ve got a new Patou frock that positively demands it.
HELEN
She can’t be long now.
CLARA
I suppose I daren’t ask Preston for the fan and creep away with it? What do you think?
HELEN
I shouldn’t, if I were you—Florence is very touchy over that sort of thing.
CLARA
She promised it to me ages ago...
PAWNIE
Surely there isn’t such a desperate hurry? You won’t be singing until about half-past eleven.
CLARA [Petulantly]
My dear, I’ve got to rehearse—I don’t know a word——
[Re-enter Preston with a “Cachet Faivre” and a glass of water.]
CLARA
You’re a saint, Preston —thank you a thousand times——
PAWNIE
Soak it a little first, dear, or you’ll choke, and I should detest that.
[CLARA soaks “Cachet” and then swallows it. .]
CLARA
Now I must lie down flat—get out of the way, Helen.
PAWNIE
Perhaps you’d like us both to go right out of the room and sit in the hall?
CLARA
No, Pawnie, I should never expect the least consideration from you.
[She lies down flat on the divan, Helen arranges cushions for her.]
CLARA
Thank you, Helen darling—I shall always come to you whenever I’m ill.
HELEN
That will be nice.
[Enter Florence Lancaster followed by Tom Veryan. Florence is brilliantly dressed almost to the point of being “outré.” Her face still retains the remnants of great beauty. Tom is athletic and good-looking. One feels he is good at games and extremely bad at everything else.]

FLORENCE
Helen — Pawnie have you been here long?
PAWNIE
No, only a few hours... fanning ourselves.
FLORENCE
My dear. I'm so frightfully sorry—we've been held up for ages in the traffic. Davis is a congenital idiot. Always manages to get to a turning just as the policeman puts out his hand. No initiative whatever. What's happened to Clara? Has she been run over?
CLARA
No, dear, I've got a frightful head.
FLORENCE
Pawnie, you know Tom, don't you?— Tom Veryan, Mr. Quentin, I'm sure you'll adore each other.
TOM [Shaking hands]
How are you?
PAWNIE
Very well, thank you—how sweet of you to ask me?
FLORENCE
Is there anything I can do, Clara?
CLARA
Yes, dear, lend me your green fan for to-night.
FLORENCE
All right—but you won't get too carried away with it, will you, dear? I should hate the feathers to come out. Does anyone want any tea?
HELEN
No thanks, dear.
FLORENCE
Cocktails, then?
PAWNIE
It's too early, sadly.
FLORENCE [Ringing bell]
It's never too early for a cocktail.
CLARA
I should like to go quite quietly into a convent and never see anybody again ever——
PAWNIE
Gregory would be bored stiff in a convent.
FLORENCE
We've just been to a most frightful Charity matinée. Nothing but inaudible speeches from dreary old actors, and leading ladies nudging one another all over the stage.
[Preston enters.]
Cocktails, Preston , and ask Barker to wrap up my green fan for Miss Hibbert to take away with her.
PRESTON
Very good, ma'am.

CLARA
You're an angel, Florence—I think I'll sit up now.
FLORENCE
Yes, Do, dear, then Tom will be able to sit down.
CLARA [Sitting up]
I really do feel most peculiar.
PAWNIE
You look far from normal, dear.
CLARA
If Pawnie's rude to me any more I shall burst into tears.
FLORENCE
Tom, give me a cigarette.

PAWNIE
Here are some in this box.
FLORENCE
No, Tom has a special rather hearty kind that I adore.
CLARA
Lend me your lip stick, Helen; mine has sunk down into itself.
HELEN
Here you are.
CLARA
What a lovely color! I look far prettier than I feel.
FLORENCE
Tom, Thank you, angel.
CLARA
I shan't be able to get down to the house until Saturday evening, Florence —I'm seeing Gregory off to Newcastle.
PAWNIE
Why Newcastle?
CLARA
His home's just near there—isn't it too awful for him?
FLORENCE
Well, wire me the time of your train, won't you?
CLARA
Of course, dear.
HELEN
You're smelling divinely, Florence. What is it?
FLORENCE [Flicking her handkerchief]
It is good, isn't it?
PAWNIE
"Narcisse Noir" of Caron. I use it too.
FLORENCE
Yes, you would, Pawnie.
PRESTON
Here is the fan, miss.
CLARA
Thank you so much—you are sweet, Florence. A fan gives me such a feeling of security when I'm singing modern stuff. I must rush now——
FLORENCE
Don't you want a cocktail before you go?
CLARA
No, darling—I should only hiccup all the evening. Good-bye, you've been such a comfort—good-bye, **HELEN**— Pawnie, you will be nicer to me over the week-end, won't you? I shall be so depressed, what with Gregory going away and everything—Good-bye, Tom —I shall dine in bed and give way at every pore——
[Clara goes out.]
PAWNIE
Poor Clara—she eternally labors under the delusion that she really matters.
HELEN
We all do that a little.
FLORENCE [Laughing]
You're awfully cruel to her, Pawnie.
PAWNIE
She upsets my vibrations.
FLORENCE [Before a glass]
I've taken a sudden hatred to this hat. [She takes it off.] That's better—are you going to the "New Elaine" to-night, either of you?
HELEN

HELEN
I'm not—but Pawnie is, of course.
PAWNIE
It's going to be amazing—what a cast, my dear! Marvelous Selwyn Steele, Nora Dean, and that perfect woman, Lily Burfield——
HELEN
Oh, I can't stand her, she always over-acts.
PAWNIE [Incensed]
How can you, Helen! Did you see her in "Simple Faith"?
HELEN
Yes, unfortunately.
PAWNIE
Oh, you're really too tiresome for words!
HELEN
Her technique creaks like machinery.
PAWNIE
It's sacrilege—she's too, too marvelous.
[Enter Preston with a tray of cocktails]
FLORENCE
What do you think about it, Tom?
TOM
I've never seen her.
FLORENCE
Yes, you have. About three months ago, at the Comedy.
TOM I really don't remember.
PAWNIE
Don't remember! An artist like that! Good God, it's agony!
HELEN
You'll look awfully tired at dinnertime, Pawnie, if you don't calm down a little. And we know you want to look your spiffiest.
FLORENCE
This is special—my own invention.
HELEN
Absolutely delicious.
TOM
A bit too sweet, isn't it?
FLORENCE
Tom, darling, don't be so taciturn—he's always taciturn after a matinée. Isn't that funny?
PAWNIE
When's Nicky coming back?
FLORENCE
To-morrow. Isn't it too divine? He's been away for a whole year, but I saw him for a moment on my way through Paris last month.
PAWNIE
Has he been working hard?
FLORENCE
I suppose so, but you know what Nicky is—bless his heart!
PAWNIE
I heard him play at Yvonne Mirabeau's.
FLORENCE
She's a loathsome woman, isn't she?
HELEN
Not as bad as that.
PAWNIE
She's a half-wit. I can't bear half-wits.
FLORENCE
She goes on so dreadfully about things—devastating.

PAWNIE
Funny Nicky's liking her so much.
FLORENCE
Only because she keeps on saying how wonderful he is—that always appeals to Nicky.
PAWNIE
How old is he now?
FLORENCE
Twenty-four. Isn't it absurd to think I have such a grown-up son—old General Fenwick said last Thursday that—— [The telephone rings; she goes to it.] Hallo—hallo! Yes, my dear. How are you?... Yes, so am I, simply worn out.... No. When? How perfectly marvelous!... No, dear, it's a prescription; but I can let you have a little in a jar.... Quite easy. All you do is just rub it on at night.... Don't be so silly.... Not in the least; if you send the car round that will be all right.... Very well.... Good-bye, darling. [She hangs up receiver.] I give Clara Hibbert ten for stupidity. Don't you, Helen?
HELEN
A hundred and ten.
PAWNIE
Ten's the limit.
TOM
I say, **Florence**—I think I'd better be getting along if I've got to be dressed and back here by half-past seven——
FLORENCE
You've got half an hour.
TOM
That's not very much for getting dressed.
FLORENCE
If you must...
The car's outside ... take it and send it straight back.
PAWNIE
Can it drop me too, Florence dear? I always feel so much richer in your car than anyone else's.
FLORENCE
Of course, Pawnie.
[The telephone rings again.]
FLORENCE
[At telephone]
Hallo!... Yes ... speaking.... How do you do——?
PAWNIE
Good-bye, Helen. It's been divine——
HELEN
Ring me up at tea-time to-morrow.
FLORENCE
How perfectly sweet of you!... Now, now, really.... Well, naturally, if you persist in saying such charming things ... [laughing gayly] ... What nonsense!...
PAWNIE
Good-bye, Florence ——
FLORENCE
[She puts her hand over mouthpiece]
It's that awful General Fenwick.... Good-bye, Pawnie dear. You're coming down to the house on Friday?
PAWNIE
Yes; too too lovely——
FLORENCE
Helen's coming by the five-o'clock—you'd better travel together.
PAWNIE
Perfect. Tom, Are you ready?

TOM
Quite.
PAWNIE [As they go out]
You can drop me first, can't you? I'm not as young as I was——
FLORENCE
[At telephone]
Please forgive me. People rushing in and out, this house grows more like a railway station every day.... Now, General, that was a deliberate compliment. [She laughs.] Ridiculous man.... Very well.... Good-bye. [She hangs up receiver.] My God! ten for dreariness!
HELEN
He's not such a bad old thing.
FLORENCE
No, but he tries to be, and that's what's so frightful. [Arranging her hair before glass.] I look like Death.... Isn't Tom a darling?
HELEN (sarcastic)
Yes, dear, without being aggressively brilliant.
FLORENCE
I'm afraid, Helen, you're getting rather bitter.
HELEN
Nonsense.
FLORENCE
It's silly to be sarcastic about Tom.
HELEN
It's better than being maudlin about him.
FLORENCE
I don't know what you mean, dear. I'm not in the least maudlin, and never have been about anybody. I sometimes wish I could be—I think I'm too hard.
HELEN
Tom will let you down.
FLORENCE
Let me down? Why ... how ... I don't understand——
HELEN
Because...You're more in love with him than he is with you.
FLORENCE
Don't be so absurd, Helen.
HELEN
It's true.
FLORENCE [Complacently]
He adores me—worships me—he's never seen anyone like me before in his life. I'm something strange ... exotic——
HELEN
As I said, You're more in love with him than he is with you.
FLORENCE
You're getting on my nerves to-day, Helen.
HELEN
You **do** see that I'm right, don't you?
FLORENCE
If you knew some of the things he's said to me.
HELEN
I can guess them.
FLORENCE
That boy was utterly un-awakened until he met me.
HELEN
He's still very young...
FLORENCE
I've taught him—everything.
HELEN
Or nothing.

FLORENCE
Why Helen, I believe you're jealous!
HELEN
Don't be a fool.
FLORENCE
I wish I hadn't this fatal knack of seeing through people.
HELEN
How's David?
FLORENCE
I don't know. He ought to be home soon.
HELEN
Doesn't he ever suspect anything?
FLORENCE
Of course not—he adores me.
HELEN
It seems so strange not to see——
FLORENCE
I'm devoted to David—I'd do anything for him, anything in the world—but he's grown old and I've kept young; it does muddle things up so. I can't help having a temperament, can I?
HELEN
Temperament.... No.
FLORENCE
David's always loved me and never understood me—you see, I'm such an extraordinary mixture. I have so many sides to my character. I adore being at home and running the house and looking after David and Nicky——
HELEN
You don't exactly overdo it on that score.
FLORENCE
Well, Nicky's been away for such ages. Also, one must be in London for the season. You can't expect me to bury myself in the country indefinitely. I shall be there practically all through the spring and summer.
HELEN
Lovely tennis parties and cricket weeks and things——
FLORENCE
Certainly.
HELEN [Kissing her]
You're a divine creature, Florence.
FLORENCE [Basking in the praise]
Am I? [The telephone rings.] Hallo!... Yes—speaking. [To Helen in a whisper.] It's Inez Zulieta. I never went to her recital.... Inez darling, I never recognized your voice.... Didn't you get my note?... It was absolutely true, I was in agony.... Inez, don't be angry. If you only knew how I longed for the sound of your wonderful, wonderful voice.... Darling.... Inez, don't be so cruel.... To-morrow, then. [She hangs up receiver.] I do wish Inez wasn't so persistent.
HELEN
You never stop encouraging her.
FLORENCE
Oh, Helen, I'm so tired of everyone.
HELEN
Except Tom?
FLORENCE
Yes, except Tom; he's such a darling.
HELEN
How do you think he and Nicky will get on?

FLORENCE
Marvelously—Tom loves music.
HELEN
He says he does. But whats the truth?
FLORENCE
My dear, I took him to that Russian thing the other day and he sat entranced from beginning to end.
HELEN
Poor Nicky!
FLORENCE
Why do you say that?
HELEN
Because I sometimes feel it.
FLORENCE [Suddenly furious]
Oh, I wonder why we're such friends—we're so opposite—you don't understand me a bit. I used to think you did, but you've been different lately—unsympathetic.
HELEN
No, I haven't. Not really Florence.
FLORENCE
Yes, you have—over Tom—I believe you're in love with him yourself.
HELEN [Smiling]
No—it isn't that.
FLORENCE
Anyhow, you can't bear him being in love with me.
HELEN
I don't think he is—really. I quite realize that he was initially violently infatuated. But that is wearing off a bit now, isn't it?
FLORENCE
No, no, it's not true—you don't understand——
HELEN
We are friends, Florence, though we're so "opposite." Do you really know the truth—inside you? Or is all this shrill vanity real?
FLORENCE
Heavens!! What's the matter with you?
HELEN
You're ten years older than I am, but when I'm your age I shall be twenty years older than you.
FLORENCE
Darling, how deliciously involved—what can you mean by that?
HELEN
I mean, I think it's silly not to grow old when the time comes.
[She rises and goes towards door.]
FLORENCE [Outraged]
Helen! [There is suddenly heard a violent knocking at the front door.] What on earth is that?
[There is a noise outside, then the door bursts open and Nicky enters. He is extremely well-dressed in traveling clothes. He is tall and pale, with thin, nervous hands.]
FLORENCE
Nicky!
NICKY
Mother!
[He embraces her.]
FLORENCE
But I'd no idea—I thought you were coming to-morrow.
NICKY
No, to-day—I wrote to you.

FLORENCE
I'm terribly, terribly excited.
NICKY
Helen, dear, how are you?
[He kisses her.]
HELEN
Splendid, Nicky.
FLORENCE
I can't get over you arriving like this.... I never realized——
NICKY
Silly ... you're looking awfully well.
FLORENCE
Am I?
NICKY
Wonderful, as usual.
FLORENCE
I was talking to George Morrison only last Thursday—
NICKY
The man who wrote that fearful book?
FLORENCE
It isn't a fearful book, it's brilliant—anyhow, he absolutely refused to believe that I had a grown-up son.
HELEN
My dears, I must fly.
NICKY
Don't go yet.
HELEN
I must—I'm hours late as it is.
NICKY
Be a little later, then.
FLORENCE
Remember, five-o'clock train on Friday.
NICKY
Oh, is she coming down to the house? Divine!
HELEN
Yes, if Florence is still speaking to me. Good-bye.
[She goes out.]
NICKY
Have you been having a scene?
FLORENCE
No, dear.
NICKY
She's a darling— Helen ——
FLORENCE
Extremely stupid and tactless sometimes.
NICKY
Well, It doesn't feel as though I'd been away at all.
FLORENCE
I've missed you appallingly—we had such a short time together in Paris. Did you enjoy all my letters?
NICKY
I adored them—so did John Bagot. I used to read most of them aloud to him. He's mad on you—saw your pictures in the Tatler, or something, and fell in love with it.
FLORENCE
Is he nice?
NICKY
He's grand.
FLORENCE
We must all dine at the Embassy. When is he coming to England?

NICKY
Not until after Christmas.
FLORENCE
You must see my new photographs; they're wonderful.
[She takes large packet from desk.]
NICKY
It's heavenly—being back.
FLORENCE
Look at this picture Nicky.
NICKY
I don't like that one.
FLORENCE
How can you say that, Nicky! Tom likes that one best of all.
NICKY
Who's Tom?
FLORENCE
Tom Veryan—he's a dear; you'll like him frightfully—you know—the very nicest type of Englishman.
NICKY
You know... I hate the very nicest type of Englishman.
FLORENCE
Don't be tiresome, Nicky; he's only twenty-four, and they all think so well of him——
NICKY
All who?
FLORENCE
All his officers and people; he's in the Brigade.
NICKY
[Holding photograph away from him and scrutinizing it through half-closed eyes]
Now that one really is enchanting—they've got your hair beautifully. Oh, yes, my dear, it's perfect——
FLORENCE [Complacently]
It is good. She's sweet—Madame Henderson, she simply won't hear of my paying for these—she says it's quite sufficient to be allowed to exhibit them in the window.
NICKY
Is anyone dining this evening?
FLORENCE
No. Oh, dear! I'd forgotten—I'm dining out with Tom.
NICKY
Oh—I see.
FLORENCE
Your first night home, too—how perfectly fiendish. What a fool I am to have muddled it up.
NICKY
It doesn't matter, darling.
FLORENCE
Oh, but it does. I wonder if we could get another seat—
NICKY
Seat? What for?
FLORENCE
We're going to the first night of "The New Elaine." It's going to be marvelous.
NICKY
Who's in it?
FLORENCE
Nora Dean and Selwyn Steele——
NICKY
Oh, God! Not them!
FLORENCE
It's silly of you always to jeer at Selwyn Steele. He' s a brilliant actor, if only he could get away from his wife....

NICKY
I couldn't bear him to-night, anyway; I'm tired. Is father home yet?
FLORENCE
No, I don't think so. Oh, I do feel such a beast——
NICKY
Don't be silly—honestly, I don't mind a bit.
FLORENCE
I know—you have a nice quiet dinner here and join us at the Embassy afterwards.
NICKY
Is it a late night?
FLORENCE
Yes, they play the most heavenly tune there now—**TOM** always makes them do it over and over again—I'll put it on——
[She goes to the gramophone.]
NICKY
How's Iris?
FLORENCE
My dear, don't speak of her.
NICKY
Why—what's she done?
FLORENCE
She's been absolutely foul.
NICKY
In what way?
FLORENCE
Every way—I never trusted her, luckily—Thank God I've got instincts about people—listen, isn't this marvelous—She said the most filthy things to Gloria Craig about me—I always knew she was insanely jealous, but there are limits. I loathe being at people's beck and call.... Come and dance.
NICKY [As they dance]
I'm sorry you've had a spat—I rather liked her——
FLORENCE
Only because she kept on saying how wonderful you were.... She doesn't know a thing about music really.
NICKY
Oh yes, she does.
FLORENCE
It's merely bluff—all that appreciation. Darling, how oddly you're dancing.
NICKY
It's probably because we haven't danced together for so long....
FLORENCE
Anyhow, now she's gone off to Monte Carlo with Violet Fenchurch—silly fool——
[Enter David Lancaster. He is an elderly gray-haired pleasant man.]
DAVID [Delighted]
Nicky—my boy——
NICKY [Kissing him]
Hallo, father——
DAVID
I thought— Florence said—to-morrow——
NICKY
Mother muddled it up.
DAVID
You look rather tired.
NICKY
I'm splendid. How's everything?

DAVID
The same as usual. I've made lots of improvements down at the house.
FLORENCE
David thinks and talks of nothing but the farm——
DAVID
It's beginning to pay a bit—Peterson's an awfully good man.
NICKY
We'll make a grand tour of it on Sunday.
DAVID
Have you enjoyed yourself in Paris?
NICKY
Oh yes, rather—it's a splendid place to work.
DAVID
It never struck me that way quite, but still——
FLORENCE
Sophie de Molignac said Nicky's playing had improved wonderfully.
DAVID
I'm so glad, Nicky.
NICKY
I've been doing some Spanish stuff lately.
DAVID
I wish I knew more about it.
NICKY
Never mind, father.
DAVID
Come to my room and talk. I can't bear that sound ——
FLORENCE
Father's such a beast; he never will dance with me.
DAVID
Is the Evening News anywhere about?
NICKY
Yes, here.
[He gives it to him.]
DAVID
I'm so glad you're home again, Nicky —don't forget—come and talk....
[He goes out.]
FLORENCE
David's so much happier in the country.
NICKY
Why on earth doesn't he retire and live at the house for good?
FLORENCE
Work has become such a habit with him—he's always hated giving up habits.
NICKY
Mother—I've got something rather important to tell you.
FLORENCE
Darling, how thrilling! What is it?
NICKY
I am engaged to be married.
FLORENCE
What!
NICKY
Practically—as much as one can be these days.
FLORENCE
Nicky!
NICKY
Don't look so stricken.

FLORENCE
But, Nicky —I never sort of visualized you being engaged, or married, or anything.
NICKY
Why not?
FLORENCE
You're not old enough.
NICKY
I'm twenty-four.
FLORENCE
You don't look it.... Thank God!
NICKY
What do you really feel about it, mother?
FLORENCE
Darling—I hardly know what to say—you've sprung it on me so suddenly. Who is she?
NICKY
A girl called Bunty Mainwaring.
FLORENCE
What a silly name!
NICKY
It isn't at all—it's very attractive.
FLORENCE
Is she an actress, or a student, or what?
NICKY
Neither—she is what is technically termed a "lady."
FLORENCE
Do you think she'll like me?
NICKY
She went mad over your photograph.
FLORENCE
Which one?
NICKY
The "looking out of the window" one.
FLORENCE
That really is one of the best I've ever had done.
NICKY
She said you had the face of a heroic little boy.
FLORENCE
What a divine thing to say!
[She glances at herself in the glass.]
NICKY
She does say divine things—she's supremely intelligent.
FLORENCE
Is she in Paris?
NICKY
No, she came over with me to-day.
FLORENCE
Where does she live?
NICKY
Just round the corner in Carbury Square.
FLORENCE
Near the Churchingtons.
NICKY
It's her mother's house, but her mother's away just now, so I asked her to change quickly and come on here.
FLORENCE
Nicky**!**
NICKY
Why not? I wanted you to see her as soon as possible.
FLORENCE [Realizing parental responsibility]
It's an awful shock, you know.
NICKY

Nonsense, mother—you're quite excited about it, really.

FLORENCE [With determination]
I shall be charming to her.

NICKY
Then she'll adore you at once—probably too much, and I shall be jealous.

FLORENCE
You'd better both dine here together and come on to the Embassy. How old is she?

NICKY
Twenty-three.

FLORENCE
What does she do?

NICKY
Nothing much—she writes things occasionally.

FLORENCE
Where did you meet her?

NICKY
First of all at a party at Olive Lloyd-Kennedy's.

FLORENCE
I can't bear Olive Lloyd-Kennedy—she's a cat.

NICKY
Then I met her again at Marion Fawcett's—a frightful sort of reception affair—she was staying with her.

FLORENCE
She seems to move exclusively with my worst enemies. Is she pretty?

NICKY
I don't know—I haven't really noticed.

FLORENCE [With a touch of real feeling]
Nicky darling, I do feel so extraordinary about it.

NICKY
Why extraordinary?

FLORENCE
It's a milestone, isn't it—you being engaged? A definite milestone? [She catches sight of herself.] Look at my nose. [She powders it.] I do hope she'll like me—I must go and dress now; Tom is fetching me half-past seven. Bring her to my room when she comes.

NICKY
Don't go for a minute.

FLORENCE
I must, really— Tom will be furious.

NICKY
Oh, damn Tom!

FLORENCE
Oh, Nicky, don't go and take one of your tiresome prejudices against him.

NICKY [Smiling]
All right, I'll try not to.

FLORENCE
He's frightfully good-looking.

NICKY
Oh!

FLORENCE
And he adores music.

NICKY
Now, then, mother——

FLORENCE
He does, honestly.

NICKY
Good.

FLORENCE

And he dances beautifully.
NICKY
I shall never stop dancing with him.
FLORENCE
And he's so good at games.
NICKY
He sounds adorable.
FLORENCE
Of course, he needs knowing.
NICKY
So do I.
FLORENCE
You will make an effort, though, darling, won't you? For my sake!
NICKY
Yes, mother.
FLORENCE
And we'll all have a divine time together, Tom and me and you and what's her name——
NICKY
Bunty.
FLORENCE
Oh yes, of course, Bunty.
[Front doorbell rings.]
NICKY
This is her, I expect.
FLORENCE
Do you feel wonderful about her?
NICKY
Yes.
FLORENCE
It is thrilling, isn't it—being in love?
NICKY [Frowning a little]
Yes.
FLORENCE
Your father was right—you look awfully tired, Nicky.
NICKY
What nonsense! I feel grand.
[Enter Preston .]
PRESTON [Announcing]
Miss Mainwaring.
[Bunty comes in, very self-assured and well-dressed. She is more attractive than pretty in a boyish sort of way.]
[Preston goes out.]
NICKY
Bunty. You **have** been quick.
BUNTY
I've simply flown.
NICKY
Bunty... here is mother....
BUNTY
Oh!
FLORENCE [Taking both her hands]
This is frightfully exciting, isn't it?
[She kisses her.]
NICKY
I've told her.
BUNTY
Are you furious?
FLORENCE
Of course not. Why should I be? 'Specially now.
BUNTY
It's absolutely incredible, you being Nicky's mother.

FLORENCE
Am I anything like you thought I'd be?
BUNTY
Yes, exactly—but I couldn't believe it until I saw you.
FLORENCE
Take off that perfectly divine cloak and have a cigarette. I've got to rush and dress now, because I'm terribly late, but you're dining here with Nicky and joining Tom Veryan and me at the Embassy afterwards.
BUNTY
Tom Veryan?...
FLORENCE
Yes. Do you know him?
BUNTY
I did when I was a child—if it's the same one.
[She takes off her cloak.]
FLORENCE [Effusively]
Nicky—I don't feel extraordinary about it anymore—I'm delighted.
NICKY
Angel.
FLORENCE
Perhaps Bunty would like to come down to the house on Friday for the weekend?
NICKY
Oh yes! Marvelous.
BUNTY
It's awfully sweet of you, Mrs. Lancaster.
FLORENCE
You must call me Florence; I can't bear Mrs. Lancaster. I must fly; Tom will be here at any moment—that's him on the desk.
BUNTY
[Going over to photograph]
Yes—it is the same one.
FLORENCE
How too divine!...
[Telephone rings.]
Hallo!... Yes, speaking!... Elsa darling, how are you?... What?... To-night?... How perfectly heavenly! Of course, I'd adore it.... Listen. Nicky's just back from Paris. Can he come, too, with Bunty Mainwaring?... Yes, he's here.... See you to-night, dear....
Here, Nicky, talk to Elsa....
[She snatches up her hand-bag and fur coat and kisses Bunty effusively.]
I'm so glad about you and Nicky —It's too wonderful.
[She rushes out.]
NICKY
[At telephone]
Hallo, Elsa.... I'd no idea you were in London. I'm terribly thrilled. My dear, you haven't.... All those lovely tunes you played to me in Paris?... How amazing! I am glad.... Have you done anything with that Tango?... You must play it to-night; I want Bunty to hear it.... It is perfect, isn't it?... Good-bye, dear. [He hangs up the receiver.] Bunty?
BUNTY
What?
NICKY
I'm terribly happy.

BUNTY
So am I.
NICKY
Do you remember how we planned all this—coming home together—and breaking it to mother—and everything?
BUNTY
Rather.
NICKY
Do you really like her?
BUNTY
I adore her—she's a perfect angel.
NICKY
I told her your "heroic little boy" line; she loved it.
BUNTY
It's true, you know—rather defiant too—laughing at Fate.
NICKY
Doesn't Paris seem ages away now?
BUNTY
A different life altogether.
NICKY
That nasty little bit of Channel is such an enormous gulf, really. Did you put that dress on on purpose.
BUNTY [Smiling]
Perhaps.
NICKY
You are a devil.
BUNTY
It's such fun being reminded of things.
NICKY
And such agony, too.
BUNTY
Nicky darling—why agony?
NICKY
It's always agony being in love, and I started loving you in that dress.
BUNTY
Did you?
NICKY
Don't pretend you didn't know.
BUNTY
I suppose one always knows—really.
NICKY
From the very first moment.
BUNTY
Yes.
NICKY
A sort of spark.
BUNTY
Your playing helped a lot.
NICKY
I meant it to.
BUNTY
Calculating pig.
NICKY
Have a cigarette?
BUNTY
All right.
[He hands her box, and she takes one.]
NICKY
[Lighting her cigarette]
I wish we weren't so free.
BUNTY

Why? What do you mean?

NICKY

I feel I should like to elope, or something violently romantic like that.

BUNTY [Laughing]

There wouldn't be much point in it now, would there?

NICKY

Perhaps not. How much do you love me?

BUNTY

I don't know.

NICKY

It's fun analyzing one's emotions.

BUNTY

Marvelous fun.

NICKY

And a comfort, too, when things go wrong—but it kills sentiment stone dead.

BUNTY

A good job, too.

NICKY

You're frightfully hard, Bunty.

BUNTY

Am I?

NICKY

Much harder than me—really.

BUNTY

You've got so much hysteria.

NICKY

I can't help it.

BUNTY

Of course not; it's your temperament. You burst out suddenly.

NICKY

Not so badly as I used to.

BUNTY

You're growing older.

NICKY

God, yes! Isn't it foul?

BUNTY

Hell, my dear.

NICKY

It's funny how mother's generation always longed to be old when they were young, and we strain every nerve to keep young.

BUNTY

That's because we see what's coming so much more clearly.

NICKY

Wouldn't it be terrible to know exactly?—I feel frightened sometimes.

BUNTY

Why?

NICKY

We're all so hectic and nervy....

BUNTY

It doesn't matter—it probably only means we shan't live so long....

NICKY [Suddenly]

Shut up—shut up....

PRESTON [Announcing]

Mr. Veryan.

[Enter Tom. Nicky greets him and shakes hands..]

NICKY

How are you? I'm Nicky —I came over to-day instead of to-morrow....

TOM

Oh!

NICKY

Do you know Bunty Mainwaring?

TOM

BUNTY—I say—I am glad.

[They shake hands warmly.]

NICKY

We'd better have some cocktails.

[He goes to the door and shouts.]

PRESTON ... bring us some cocktails....

TOM

This is jolly. I didn't know what had become of you.

BUNTY

I've been living in Paris a good deal.

TOM

How many years ago is it since we?...

BUNTY

During the War. The last time I saw you y**ou** were at Sandhurst.

NICKY

Such a pretty place.

TOM

You've hardly altered a bit—more grown up, of course.

NICKY

All this is most affecting.

TOM

Bunty and I used to know each other awfully well.

NICKY

What fun!

BUNTY [Warningly]

Nicky....

NICKY

But it is—it's thrilling—there's nothing so charming as a reunion.

BUNTY

Nicky and I have been traveling all day.... Boats and trains get on his nerves....

NICKY [Irritated]

When the cocktails come, tell Preston to bring mine to me in father's room.

BUNTY

Nicky, don't be so silly.

NICKY

Surely it's not silly to want to talk to my aged father after a year's debauch in Paris? I fail to see why you should have the monopoly of reunions.

BUNTY

Well, don't be long.

TOM

Cheerio!

NICKY [Crossly]

Oh, God! [He goes out.]

TOM

What's up?

BUNTY

These temperamental musicians.

TOM

Silly ass.

BUNTY

He isn't really—he's only jealous.

TOM
Why ... is he?...
BUNTY
We're by way of being engaged.
TOM
What?
BUNTY
Why not?
TOM
Are you ... are you in love with him?
BUNTY [Lightly]
Yes—isn't it damnable?
TOM
Good Lord! [He laughs.]
BUNTY
What are you laughing at?
TOM
It seems so funny you being in love with that sort of chap.
BUNTY
What do you mean by "that sort of chap"?
TOM
Oh—I don't know, that type seems so unlike you.
BUNTY
Type?
TOM
Yes, you know—up in the air—effeminate.
BUNTY
You're more bucolic than you used to be, Tom.
TOM
Here, I say....
[Enter Preston with cocktails.]
BUNTY
Will you please take Mr. Nicky's in to him in his father's room?
PRESTON
Yes, miss.
TOM
Is Mrs. Lancaster nearly ready?
PRESTON
I think so, sir.
TOM
Ask her to hurry. We shall be late.
PRESTON
Yes, sir.
BUNTY
I can laugh now. [She does so.]
TOM
Why?
BUNTY
I've just realized something.
TOM
What?
BUNTY
We shall meet again—over the week-end.
TOM
Are you coming down to the house?
BUNTY
Yes.
TOM
That's splendid. Come for a tramp Sunday morning and we'll talk.
BUNTY
What about?

TOM
Oh, lots of things—old times.
BUNTY. [Lifting her cocktail]
Old times, Tom.
TOM
[Doing the same]
Cheerio!
Curtain

ACT II

The scene is the hall of Mrs. Lancaster's house, about forty miles from London.
When the curtain rises it is just after dinner on the Sunday of the week-end party—the gramophone is going and there is a continual buzz of conversation. Clara Hibbert, an emaciated soprano, is dancing with Tom
Veryan, Helen with Pawnie, and Nicky
with Bunty. Flowrence is seated on the club fender, talking intellectually with Bruce Fairlight, an earnest dramatist, the squalor of whose plays is much appreciated by those who live in comparative luxury.

HELEN
It's much too fast, Nicky.
TOM
Do slow down a bit.
NICKY
It's the pace that's marked on the record.
PAWNIE
I've never danced well since the War, I don't know why.
FLORENCE
But your last act was so strong, when she came in half mad with fright and described everything minutely.
BRUCE
I try to write as honestly as possible.
CLARA
I gave her three for manners, but seven for charm, because I had to be a little nice!
TOM
I thought she was rather a decent sort.
BUNTY
No, but really, Nicky, his technique completely annihilated his inspiration.
NICKY
Not with Debussy and Ravel, with the older masters, yes; but he's probably tired of them.
BUNTY
That's so stupid, I think.
HELEN
My dear, it was the most "chic" thing you've ever seen, but unfortunately the wrong color.
PAWNIE
Marion Ferris had that Poiret model copied in the most frightful blue!
CLARA
I believe my shoe's coming off.
TOM
Shall we stop?
CLARA
No, it's all right.

FLORENCE
I wonder if you could gouge this cigarette-end out of the holder for me?
BRUCE
I'll try. [He does so.] I always smoke a pipe when I'm working.
FLORENCE
How soothing!
BUNTY
I suppose one can never really judge properly from a recital.
NICKY
Not with him, because he's not dramatic enough.
BUNTY
Dramatic pianists make me uncomfortable.
HELEN
PAWNIE, your tongue grows more venomous every day.
PAWNIE
[Giggling]
Well, I had to say something—anyhow, it was true.
HELEN
Especially about her ankles.
PAWNIE
My dear, yes!
[They both laugh.]
[The record comes to an end, and Nicky begins to change it. Everyone talks and laughs.]
CLARA
You must come next Sunday week.
TOM
Thanks awfully, I'd love to.
CLARA
I'm only singing ballads, but you know what Sunday concerts are.
TOM
Oh yes, rather.
CLARA [To Nicky]
What's on the other side?
NICKY
"You've got the cutest ears and eyes and nose."
PAWNIE
Do put on "Spoony Moon in Upper Carolina."
HELEN
No, don't put it on, Nicky; play it yourself; you always make the gramophone go too quickly.
BUNTY
Yes, go on, Nicky.
FLORENCE [Refusing Bruce's offer of a cigarette]
No, thanks, not another—I'm dancing with Tom.
BUNTY [Gayly]
Missing one, Tom.
TOM
Righto!
[Nicky commences to play a fox-trot.]
BUNTY
[Dragging Bruce to his feet]
Come on, Mr. Fairlight, don't overdo the serious dramatist stunt!
BRUCE
I warn you I'm no good.
[He dances with her and confirms the truth of his warning. CLARA Hibbert squashes down on the piano-seat next to Nicky and endeavors with one finger in the

treble to follow the tune he is playing. Helen and Pawnie stand right down close to the footlights, smoking and talking; their backs are half turned to the audience, but their remarks must be perfectly audible.]

HELEN
Tom Veryan doesn't dance as well as he thinks he does.

PAWNIE
With that figure he ought to be marvelous.

HELEN
He's too athletic.

PAWNIE
Anyhow, I'm sure he's a success at the Bath Club.

HELEN
Doesn't Florence look astounding?

PAWNIE
Absolutely. She knows exactly what suits her.

HELEN
Where's David?

PAWNIE
He went off to his study to smoke.

HELEN
I do wish Florence wouldn't be irritable with him in front of everybody. I felt acutely uncomfortable at dinner.

PAWNIE
It makes Nicky furious as a rule, but to-night he was too occupied with that stupid little fool Bunty Mainwaring to take any notice.

HELEN
She's an excellent type.

PAWNIE
Very average; I only hope nothing will come of Nicky's mania for her.

HELEN
I don't think we need worry.

PAWNIE
Why?

HELEN
Wait and see, my dear.

CLARA
[Leaving Nicky at the piano and advancing on Pawnie] Come and dance, Pawnie, and tell me how divinely I sang on Tuesday.

PAWNIE [Agreeably]
You didn't.

CLARA
Ten for cruelty.
[They start to dance. Helen moves over to the mantelpiece for a cigarette.]

HELEN
Have you a match, Nicky?

NICKY
Isn't this a marvelous tune?

HELEN
Fascinating! [She goes over and sits next to him. Gently slipping her hand into his coat pocket.] Darling, I do want a match. [She brings out a little box.] What a divine little box!
[Nicky stops playing and jumps up.]

NICKY [Violently]
Helen, give that to me!——
[Everyone stops dancing.]

CLARA

Nicky dear, don't be tiresome.

NICKY

[Recovering himself.] I'm sick of playing. Let's have the gramophone again. [To Helen.] Here's a light, dearie.

[He takes match-box out of another pocket and lights Helen's cigarette. She looks at him queerly for a moment, then he restarts the gramophone and everyone begins to dance again except Helen and Bruce Fairlight. Helen goes over to the fireplace and takes a coffee-cup from the mantelpiece.]

HELEN

Whose coffee is this? Someone drank mine, and I'd hardly touched it.

BRUCE

If it had no sugar in it, it's mine.

HELEN [Draining it]

It had no sugar in it.

FLORENCE

You're dancing abominably, Tom.

TOM

Oh, Am I?

FLORENCE

What's the matter with you?

TOM

I don't know. I suppose I'm tired.

FLORENCE

You're not usually tired when you're dancing with me.

TOM

Oh, Florence, don't nag!

FLORENCE

How dare you speak to me like that?

[She stops dancing and goes over to the fireplace.]

TOM [Following her]

I say, Florence—I'm sorry——

PAWNIE

Let's stop the music for a moment and think of something really marvelous to do.

BUNTY

No, let's go on dancing.

CLARA

I'm exhausted.

PAWNIE [Stopping the gramophone]

What was that divine game we played coming back from Paris, Helen?

HELEN

Just ordinary "Clumps," wasn't it?

BUNTY

I loathe "Clumps."

NICKY

What about the History game?

BRUCE

What's that?

BUNTY

Oh no, Nicky; it's too intellectual.

FLORENCE

There's a Mah-Jong set in the drawing-room.

PAWNIE

How divine! Let's make up a table immediately.

CLARA

I won't be happy until someone gives me a set made entirely of jade.

NICKY
Come on, Bunty.
BUNTY
[Looking at Tom]
I can't play it.
NICKY
You can; you used to play in Paris with Yvonne.
BUNTY
I've forgotten it.
NICKY
You'll soon remember again.
[He drags her off.]
PAWNIE
Come along, CLARA.
CLARA
I insist on Mr. Fairlight learning.
BRUCE
I'm afraid I'm no good at that sort of thing.
CLARA
You'll be able to put it in one of your plays.
PAWNIE
Come and watch; it's too thrilling for words.
[Clara, Bruce and Pawnie go off.]
HELEN
Have you only one set, Florence?
FLORENCE
Yes. Isn't it maddening? Clara promised to bring hers down, but forgot.
HELEN
Does Bruce Fairlight play Bridge?
FLORENCE
No, I don't think so.
HELEN
Dramatists are such a comfort in a house party, aren't they?
[She goes off.]
TOM
Are you coming, Florence?
FLORENCE
No.
TOM
[Nonplussed]
Oh!
FLORENCE
But please don't let me stop you going. I'm sure you're dying to be with the others.
TOM
I say, Florence, I wish you wouldn't go on like that.
FLORENCE
I don't know what's the matter with you; you've never behaved like this before.
TOM
I haven't behaved like anything.
FLORENCE
You've been exceedingly rude to me, both at dinner and afterwards.
TOM
I wasn't at dinner.
FLORENCE
Yes, you were; you snapped me up when I said I didn't like Elsie Saunders.
TOM
You know perfectly well she's a friend of mine.
FLORENCE

Well, she oughtn't to be, after the things she's said about me.

TOM

You will go on imagining.

FLORENCE

Nothing of the sort—I know! If you weren't so dense you'd see, too—the jealousy I have to put up with. I get so tired of it all, so desperately tired.

[She becomes a little pathetic.]

TOM

Talk about being different, you're different too——

FLORENCE

I'm unhappy.

TOM

Why?

FLORENCE

Because I hate to see you being put against me.

TOM

Florence!

FLORENCE

You'll understand one day. They're all very subtle, but I can see.

TOM

Nobody's said a word to me about you; they'd better not try.

FLORENCE

Why, what would you do?

TOM

I'd—I'd be furious.

FLORENCE

Oh!

TOM

And I'd let them see it, too.

FLORENCE

[Holding out her hands]

Tom——

TOM

Yes?

FLORENCE

I forgive you.

TOM

I can't bear you being angry with me.

FLORENCE

Can't you, really?

TOM

It makes me feel beastly.

FLORENCE

Come and sit here.

TOM [Sitting next to her on the club fender]

That's a lovely dress.

FLORENCE

It is sweet, isn't it?

TOM

You always wear wonderful clothes.

FLORENCE

Do I, Tom?

TOM

You know you do.

FLORENCE

Do you remember the very first time we met?

TOM

Rather.

FLORENCE

Oxford's so full of romance, isn't it?

TOM

It was when you came down.

FLORENCE

Thank you, Tom dear.

TOM

We did have fun.

FLORENCE

You used to come up to matinées, and I'd motor you back afterwards.

TOM

Ripping!

FLORENCE

That reminds me, I've got seats for "Rolling Stones" on Tuesday. Don't forget.

TOM

You never said you were going to get them.

FLORENCE

It doesn't matter. I thought I did. We'd better dine at Claridges.

TOM

But, Florence, I—I can't come!

FLORENCE

Why not?

TOM

I promised to go out.

FLORENCE

Who with?

TOM

Mother.

FLORENCE

Can't you put her off? It will be such a good first night.

TOM

Well—you see, as a matter of fact—it's rather awkward. I put her off the other day——

[There is a slight pause.]

FLORENCE [A trifle coldly]

Oh, well, never mind, we'll go some other night.

[Enter David.]

DAVID

Hallo, Florence! I thought you were in the drawing-room.

FLORENCE

They're playing Mah-Jong, and there's only one set. I shall break in presently.

TOM

I'll just go and see how they're getting on.

[This obvious excuse for getting out of the room is not lost upon Florence.]

FLORENCE

Yes, do.

TOM

Come and play soon.

[He goes out quietly.]

FLORENCE

Don't you think this is a divine frock?

DAVID

Very pretty.

FLORENCE

You and **HELEN** seemed to be very thick at dinner. What were you talking about?

DAVID

Nothing much. I like Helen.

FLORENCE
Only because she flatters you and listens to everything you say.
DAVID
She doesn't flatter me.
FLORENCE
I suppose she was talking about the farm and giving her opinions.
DAVID
We did discuss the farm a little.
FLORENCE
She doesn't know a thing about it, really.
DAVID
Perhaps not, but it passed the time.
[He goes out.]
[**FLORENCE** sits still for a moment, then she wearily buries her face in her hands. Enter Nicky.]
NICKY
What's the matter, darling?
FLORENCE
Nothing. I've got a slight headache.
NICKY
Why don't you go Byes?
FLORENCE
I can't; it's much too early.
NICKY
I'm sick of Mah-Jong.
FLORENCE
Who's playing now?
NICKY
Pawnie and Helen and Clara are trying to teach Bruce Fairlight; he's an awful fool at it.
[He sits down at the piano and plays absently.]
FLORENCE
You must get Bunty out of that habit of contradicting everything people say.
NICKY
I don't see why.
FLORENCE
It's bad breeding.
NICKY [Striking a note viciously]
Who cares nowadays? We've all got a right to our opinions.
FLORENCE
She seems to forget that I'm much older than she is.
NICKY
That's no argument, mother; it's silly only to remember your age when someone says something you don't like.
FLORENCE
She's having a bad effect on you.
NICKY
Nonsense!
FLORENCE
You've changed since Paris.
NICKY
Naturally.
FLORENCE
You never used to be rude to me.
NICKY
Oh, damn, I'm not rude.
FLORENCE
Yes, you are.
NICKY

Well, don't start running down Bunty.
FLORENCE
Stop playing—stop playing!
NICKY [Getting up angrily]
Oh, God!
[He goes towards door and collides with Helen.]
HELEN
What's happening?
FLORENCE
Nothing. Bunty's just putting Nicky against me. I knew she'd try to. [She goes out.]
HELEN
You must be having a delightful evening! You leave the drawing-room, having rowed with Bunty, and come here and row with Florence.
NICKY
Mother's impossible.
HELEN
She's no different from what she's always been.
NICKY
Well, I haven't realized it before.
HELEN [Taking a cigarette and lighting it]
You haven't been engaged before.
NICKY
I'm hating this house party.
HELEN [Lightly]
Don't say that, dear; it's not kind.
NICKY
You know I don't mean you.
HELEN
Are you very much in love?
NICKY
Yes.—No.—I don't know.
HELEN
I wonder.
NICKY
It's utterly devastating, anyhow.
HELEN
When did you meet her?
NICKY
About five months ago.
HELEN
What was she doing in Paris?
NICKY
Oh, I don't know—fooling about.
HELEN
Splendid.
NICKY
She's been studying French literature.
HELEN
Why?
NICKY
She's going to write—herself—someday.
HELEN
Oh, I see!
NICKY
HELEN, do you like her?
HELEN
I can't tell yet—yesterday was the first time I'd ever set eyes on her.
NICKY
She's wonderfully intelligent.
HELEN
Yes—I'm sure she is.

NICKY
You don't like her?
HELEN
I tell you—I'm not sure yet.
NICKY
It's generally the way—one's friends always hate one another.
HELEN [Smiling]
It is difficult for you, isn't it?
NICKY
I should so like you to like her.
HELEN
Very well—I'll try.
NICKY
She's utterly opposite to me in every way.
HELEN
Yes, I see that.
NICKY
But that's as it ought to be, isn't it?
HELEN
It depends.
NICKY
I need a sort of restraining influence terribly.
HELEN
Yes, Nicky.
NICKY
She's awfully good for me.
HELEN
Is she?
NICKY
Yes—she curbs me when I get temperamental and silly.
HELEN
I always felt you needed encouraging more than curbing.
NICKY [Laughing]
Oh, Helen—aren't you a darling!
HELEN
I mean it.
NICKY
You're wrong, though—I'm all over the place.
HELEN
Anyhow, I do hope you'll be very happy with her.
NICKY
I don't suppose I shall ever be that. I haven't got the knack.
HELEN
Do you work hard?
NICKY
Yes.
HELEN
Really hard?
NICKY
Frightfully.
HELEN
Liar!
NICKY
If you'd seen me in Paris—studying, studying—all night long until the gray dawn put the guttering candle to shame—and my nerveless hands dropped from the keys——
HELEN
Candles gutter awfully quickly when they're burned at both ends.

NICKY
Meaning that I look a debauched wreck of my former self?
HELEN
Exactly.
NICKY
If you go on encouraging me at this rate I shall commit suicide.
HELEN
You do resent anyone taking a real interest in you, don't you?
NICKY
I distrust it.
HELEN
Why?
NICKY
I don't know—I'm not worth it.
HELEN
You seem to be suffering from a slight inferiority complex.
NICKY
Not a bit of it—I'm gay and witty and handsome.
HELEN
Oh, Nicky, you're so maddening.
NICKY
Don't be cross, Helen.
HELEN
I'm one of the few people who know what you're really like, and you won't give me the credit for it.
NICKY
Do you think you do, honestly?
HELEN
Yes—and I'm exceedingly worried about you.
NICKY
You needn't be.
HELEN
You're sensitive and reserved and utterly foolish.
NICKY
Thank you—I'm beginning to feel beautifully picturesque.
HELEN
And you're scared.
NICKY
Why! What have I to be scared about?
HELEN
Would you like me to tell you?
NICKY
No.
HELEN
Why not?
NICKY
Because you're a sentimentalist, and you see things that aren't there at all.
HELEN
You're far more sentimental than I.
NICKY
Darling Helen—you've got such a lovely mind—like a Christmas card—with frosted robins and sheep wandering about in the snow—bleating.
HELEN
All the same, I should give up drugs if I were you.
NICKY
Helen!
HELEN

Well?
NICKY
I don't know what you mean.
HELEN
Do you think I can't see?
NICKY [Forcing a laugh]
You're being terribly funny, aren't you?
HELEN
You fool! You unutterable little fool!
NICKY
Don't be dramatic, dear.
HELEN
I thought you had common sense; I credited you with more intelligence than that.
NICKY
If you persist in being absurd.
HELEN [Suddenly with intense feeling]
Nicky, don't resist me, don't fight me; I'm your friend; I wouldn't have said a word if I weren't. You've got to stop it; you haven't gone very far yet; there's still time. For God's sake listen to reason.
NICKY
Shut up, shut up, don't speak so loudly.
HELEN
Nicky, throw it away.
NICKY
When did you find out?
HELEN
Tonight, you know, when you were playing, but I've guessed for ages.
NICKY
You needn't be frightened, Helen; I only take just the tiniest little bit, once in a blue moon!
HELEN
If anything goes wrong, you'll take a lot. Throw it away.
NICKY
What could go wrong?
HELEN
Never mind, throw it away!
NICKY
I can't. Look out; somebody's coming.
[Enter David.]
DAVID
Hallo!
NICKY
Hallo, father!
DAVID
What's the matter?
NICKY
The matter—why?
DAVID
You look very worried.
NICKY
Helen and I have just had a grand heart-to-heart talk; we've undone our back hair, loosened our stays and wallowed in it.
DAVID
Oh, I see!
HELEN
We haven't seen one another for so long—it was inevitable.
DAVID

You never came and looked at the farm this morning. I waited for you.
NICKY
I'm awfully sorry, father—I just went on sleeping.
HELEN
I'll see you later, Nicky.
NICKY
All right.
[**HELEN** goes out.]
DAVID
How do you think your mother's looking?
NICKY
Splendid—the same as ever.
DAVID
Would you like a cigar?
NICKY
No, thanks, father—I'm not very good at them.
DAVID
I was just on my way to bed—there are far too many people in the house.
NICKY [Smiling]
You must be used to that by now.
DAVID
You ought to stay down here, you know—during the week, and get some fresh air.
NICKY
I've got such millions of things to do in London.
DAVID
Worth doing?
NICKY
Yes, of course.
DAVID
You look as though you needed a rest.
NICKY
You needn't worry about me—I feel splendid.
DAVID
She seems a nice girl.
NICKY
Who—**BUNTY**?
DAVID
Yes. Quiet and untiresome.
NICKY
She's a darling!
DAVID
When do you propose to get married?
NICKY
I don't know. The engagement's only a sort of try out, you know.
DAVID
Oh, I see. I didn't realize that. I'm so unversed in modern technicalities.
NICKY
It's her idea really—just to tread water for a bit.
DAVID
It sounds an excellent plan.
NICKY
I'm awfully glad you like her.
DAVID
Is she musical?
NICKY
Oh, yes—frightfully!
DAVID
Good!
NICKY

Father, I think I will come down here for a few days—and work quietly.

DAVID

If you do that I'll go up to London every other day. I see so little of you when you're at the flat.

NICKY

That's settled then. I wonder what mother will say!

DAVID

I'll talk to her.

NICKY

All right. She won't bother about us much.

DAVID

No—I don't suppose she will. I think I'll be getting along to bed now. Good night, my boy!

NICKY

Good night, father!

[They shake hands, and David pats Nicky's shoulder rather tentatively. He goes upstairs and Nicky wanders to the piano. He plays absently, and Bunty enters.]

BUNTY

I want to talk to you.

NICKY [Still playing]

All right.

BUNTY

Perhaps you'd stop playing for a minute.

NICKY

Won't you let me woo you with a little Scriabin?

BUNTY

Please stop.

NICKY

I'm unappreciated—that's what it is.

[There is a slight pause—he goes over to her.]

I say, Bunty ——

BUNTY

What?

NICKY

Before you say anything awful to me, I am sorry for being rude just now.

BUNTY

So you ought to be.

NICKY

Will you forgive me?

BUNTY

Yes, I forgive you.

NICKY

I've been irritable all the evening.

BUNTY

Give me a cigarette, Nicky

NICKY

Here.

[They both smoke.]

BUNTY

Thanks.

NICKY

What did you want to talk to me about?

BUNTY

Lots of things—us!

NICKY [Hardening]

Oh, I see!

BUNTY

Don't you think it's rather silly—being engaged?

NICKY

No, not at all.

BUNTY

I do.
NICKY
Just because we bickered a bit to-night?
BUNTY
No, not only because of that.
NICKY
Why then?
BUNTY
Can't you see?
NICKY
No.
BUNTY
Well, we're not very suited to each other, are we?
NICKY
Why do you suddenly say that?
BUNTY
Because I've only just realized it.
NICKY
I'm sorry.
BUNTY
It's not your fault particularly.
NICKY
I'm glad.
BUNTY
It's circumstances and surroundings.
NICKY
Oh, that can be altered quite easily. We'll change the shape of the house—we'll take all that wall away and turn that into a studio—you love studios, don't you?—then we'll transform the drawing-room into an enormous aviary.
BUNTY
It's practically that now!
NICKY
And then we'll——
BUNTY
Shut up, Nicky!
NICKY
I'm only trying to be amenable.
BUNTY
Are you, really?
NICKY
Yes, I'm putting up a sort of defense, Bunty. I have a feeling that you're going to be unpleasant, and I want to establish myself comfortably before you start.
BUNTY
I don't want to be unpleasant—only honest.
NICKY
You won't let the two run together, will you?
BUNTY [With vehemence]
You're hopeless, hopeless, hopeless!
NICKY
Yes—I think I am, rather.
BUNTY
In a way I'm glad—it makes it easier.
NICKY
Does it?
BUNTY
You're not in love with me, really—you couldn't be!
NICKY
Please don't say that.
BUNTY
Why don't you face things properly?
NICKY

One generally has to in the end. I like to put it off for as long as possible.

BUNTY
That's cowardly.

NICKY
Don't be pompous, darling.

BUNTY
You're a great help, I must say.

NICKY
Why should I help to destroy my own happiness?

BUNTY
That's self-pity and self-deception.

NICKY
Why are you going on like this?

BUNTY
Because I tell you—I've realized the truth.

NICKY
I suppose you've taken a hatred to mother!

BUNTY
No, not a hatred.

NICKY
You don't like her.

BUNTY
Not very much.

NICKY
Why not? She likes you.

BUNTY
She detests me.

NICKY
Nonsense! Why should she?

BUNTY
Because I'm young.

NICKY
What a filthy thing to say!

BUNTY
It's true.

NICKY
It's nothing of the sort.

BUNTY
You're so stupid sometimes.

NICKY
Thank you.

BUNTY
Don't let's start bickering again.

NICKY
We won't discuss mother any more then.

BUNTY
You started it.

NICKY
I wish I could make you understand her like I do. I mean she's awfully irritating, I know—but deep down she's marvelous in spite of everything.

BUNTY [Coldly]
Everything?

NICKY [Vehemently]
Yes, everything! Don't be a beast, Bunty; just try to see her point a little, even if you do dislike her. She is terribly silly about being "young," I know, but she's been used to so much admiration and flattery and everything always, she feels she sort of can't give it up—you do see that, don't you? And she hasn't really anything in the least comforting to fall back upon. She's not clever—real kind of brain cleverness—and father's no good, and I'm no good, and all the time

she's wanting life to be as it was instead of as it is. There's no harm in her anywhere—she's just young inside. Can't you imagine the utter foulness of growing old? 'Specially if you've been lovely and attractive like she was. The beautiful Flo Lancaster! She used to be known as that. I can remember her when I was quite small, coming up to say good night to me, looking too perfectly radiant for words—and she used to come to the school, too, sometimes, and everyone used to go mad over her, and I used to get frightfully proud and excited——

BUNTY

I've never heard you talk like this before.

NICKY

I don't think I ever have.

BUNTY

I like you better clear cut, not blurred by sentiment.

[Nicky looks at her for a moment in amazement.]

NICKY

To describe you as hard would be inadequate—you're metallic!

BUNTY

I can see straight.

NICKY [Politely]

Can you?

BUNTY

Yes. We could never be happy together.

NICKY

Perhaps not.

BUNTY

Shall we just—finish—then?

NICKY

Certainly, I'm sorry we were too modern to have an engagement ring; you'd have been able to give it back to me so beautifully.

BUNTY

Don't be ridiculous!

NICKY

Better than being blurred by sentiment.

[Bunty lights another cigarette and, kicking off her shoes, perches on the club fender and proceeds to warm her feet at the fire.]

[Enter Clara Hibbert.]

CLARA

My dear, I'm shattered—and I'm going straight to bed—probably for several weeks.

BUNTY

Why?

CLARA

Shshsh! He's coming.

BUNTY

Who's coming?

CLARA

Bruce Fairlight. I've been teaching him Mah-Jong. These master brains—agony, dear——

[Enter Bruce Fairlight.]

BRUCE

Very interesting, that game.

CLARA [Weakly]

I thought you'd like it.

BRUCE

It's interesting psychologically! The concentration and suspense——

[Enter Florence, Helen, Pawnie and Tom. Tom is grasping a whisky and soda— Pawnie is eating a biscuit.]

PAWNIE

I'm quite exhausted; it must be the country air——

FLORENCE

—It was too lovely, because I started with two red dragons in my hand——

HELEN

I wondered who had them——

PAWNIE

One more tune, Nicky, before we go to bed——

FLORENCE

Yes, just one——

NICKY

[Looking at Bunty]

I'll play "I love you"—such a romantic tune.

[He puts on the gramophone.]

BUNTY

Do.

HELEN

What time's everyone going up in the morning?

FLORENCE

The ten-o'clock's the best—we'll have breakfast at nine downstairs.

PAWNIE

[Confidentially]

Do you know that in London I can never do more than nibble a piece of thin toast, and whenever I'm away I eat enormously!

NICKY

How very peculiar!

PAWNIE

Your tone revolts me, Nicky. You must never be irascible with your old friends.

NICKY

I haven't got any friends.

HELEN

Nicky!

NICKY

Sorry, Helen.

FLORENCE

I don't know what's the matter with Nicky. He's been in a vile temper all the evening—his first week-end home, too.

NICKY

Such a pity, when so much trouble has been taken to make me happy and cozy.

TOM

Come and dance, Bunty.

BUNTY

No, not now.

NICKY

Dance with him, Bunty. Chaps must have exercise.

FLORENCE

You dance with Bunty, Pawnie —I'll dance with Tom — come on.

[She and Tom dance.]

HELEN

The great thing in this world is not to be obvious,

NICKY—

over anything!

[Florence and **T**om dance,
also Helen and Pawnie. Everyone talks at once, as in the beginning of the act.]

PAWNIE
Its infuriating,
Helen. It's a wonderful book.

HELEN
Thoroughly second-rate.

PAWNIE
What do you think about Mischievous Passion, Fairlight?

BRUCE
I never read novels on principle.

PAWNIE
Well, you must read this—it's colossal.

HELEN
Don't be led away by Pawnie, Mr. Fairlight, he has no discrimination.

PAWNIE
But I tell you it's brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!

HELEN
Nonsense.

PAWNIE
There are times, Hele, when I could willingly see you dead at my feet.

FLORENCE
A little slower, for Heaven's sake!

NICKY
How's that?
[He makes it far too slow.]

FLORENCE
I think you'd better go to bed, Nicky.

HELEN
We're all going, anyhow.

NICKY
Not yet, please, mummy dear—I'm having such a lovely time!
[He slams off in a rage.]

PAWNIE
I always knew the Continent was fatal for the young.

BUNTY
Nicky's upset—it's my fault—we're not engaged any more.

FLORENCE
Why—what's happened?

BUNTY
Nothing happened—it was never very serious, really.

HELEN
I had a feeling that it was.

BUNTY
You were wrong.

FLORENCE
Well, I must say it's all been rather abrupt.

BUNTY
It's better to finish things off at once—cleanly—if you're not quite sure, don't you think?

FLORENCE
Well, I'm sorry, Bunty. If you feel like that about it there's nothing more to be said.

BUNTY
I wouldn't have mentioned it at all—only you all seemed to be blaming him for being irritable——

HELEN
Poor Nicky!

CLARA
I really must go up to bed now. I'm so tired. Good night, Florence dear.
FLORENCE
Good night, Clara. Breakfast at nine. Have you got books and everything you want?
CLARA
Yes, thanks. Good night, everyone.
[Everyone murmurs good night politely.]
FLORENCE
Tom, be an angel and fetch me a glass of milk. It's in the drawing-room.
TOM
All right.
[He goes off.]
HELEN
Come on up, Florence. I'm dead.
FLORENCE
So am I. Will you turn out the lights when you come?
PAWNIE
With beautiful precision, dear.
FLORENCE
[As she and Helen go upstairs]
Tell Tom to bring my milk up to me, somebody.
PAWNIE
All right.
FLORENCE
Good night, Mr. Fairlight.
BRUCE
Good night.
PAWNIE
Good night, Florence
[Florence and Helen go off.]
BRUCE
I suppose we'd all better go up.
BUNTY
I don't feel I could sleep yet.
[Re-enter Tom with glass of milk.]
TOM
Hallo! Where's Florence?
BUNTY
Gone up to bed. Will you take her milk to her?
PAWNIE
What's become of Nicky?
TOM
In the smoking-room, I think.
BRUCE
Good night, Miss Mainwaring.
BUNTY
Good night.
[They shake hands.]
PAWNIE
I shall come, too—good night.
TOM
Good night.
PAWNIE
[To Bruce as they go upstairs]
When you're writing, do your characters grow as you go along?
BRUCE
No, I think each one out minutely beforehand.
PAWNIE
How too intriguing.
[They go off.]

TOM
So you've broken it off already?
BUNTY
Yes.
TOM
I didn't know you were going to do it so soon.
BUNTY
It's better to get things over.
TOM
What did he say?
BUNTY
Nothing much.
TOM
Was he furious?
BUNTY
Oh, what does it matter? Don't let's go on about it.
TOM
It's all damned awkward.
BUNTY
What?
TOM
The whole thing.
BUNTY
You're rather scared, aren't you?
TOM
No, not exactly—now that I've got you to back me up.
BUNTY
I shall be glad when we're out of this house.
TOM
So shall I.
BUNTY
I hate the atmosphere.
TOM
I don't know how I've stood it for so long.
BUNTY
You didn't notice it until I came, any more than I noticed Nicky's atmosphere until you came.
TOM
It's queer, isn't it?
BUNTY
We're reverting to type, don't you see?
TOM
How d'ye mean?
BUNTY
Never mind, it's true.
TOM
Do you think I'm being a cad to Florence?
BUNTY
Yes, I do rather.
TOM
But Bunty! You said this morning——
BUNTY
That I didn't see how you could help yourself; neither I do. It's frightfully difficult, but it's not altogether your fault, any more than it would have been mine if I'd married Nicky. One gets carried away by glamour, and personality, and magnetism—they're beastly treacherous things.
TOM
You are wonderful.
BUNTY
Don't be silly.
TOM
You're so cool and clear, and you see everything.

BUNTY
I'm sorry—for Nicky.
TOM
Oh, damn Nicky!
BUNTY [Laughing]
Oh, Tom!
TOM
Why, what's up?
BUNTY
You're so dead set.
TOM
You're worth ten of him any day. What's the use of a chap like that? He doesn't do anything except play the piano—he can't play any games, he's always trying to be funny——
BUNTY
Shut up, Tom you're being rather cheap. I haven't reverted to type so quickly that I can't see some of the things I'm missing.
TOM
I wish I knew what you were talking about.
BUNTY
Oh, God! I feel so miserable!
[She burst into tears.]
TOM [Flummoxed]
I say— Bunty —for Heaven's sake——
[He puts his arm round her.]
BUNTY
[Shaking him off]
Don't, don't. Give me my shoes——
[He picks up her shoes; she puts them on. She is half sobbing all the time.]
TOM
I say, old girl, hadn't you better go to bed? You're all wrought up!
BUNTY
He said beastly things.
TOM
I'll wring his neck.
BUNTY
[With a fresh burst of tears]
Shut up, Tom, shut up——
TOM
Bunty, stop crying—there's a dear; please, please stop crying——
[He takes her in his arms and kisses her; she is groping for her handkerchief. Florence comes quietly downstairs.]
BUNTY
I can't find my hanky!
TOM
Here's mine.
FLORENCE [Like a pistol shot]
Tom!
[Tom and Bunty break away.]
TOM
Yes, Florence?
FLORENCE [Ominously]
What does this mean?
TOM
I'm sorry, Florence —I——
FLORENCE
You utter cad!
BUNTY

Look here—I should like to say——
FLORENCE
Be quiet—mind your own business.
[Nicky enters.]
NICKY [Seeing tears on Bunty's face]
What's the matter—is anybody hurt?
FLORENCE [Ominously]
No, not hurt! Not hurt yet!
BUNTY
I banged my hand, that's all.
FLORENCE
Liar!
NICKY
Mother—don't be so stupid—
TOM
Florence —I——
FLORENCE
Don't speak to me——
NICKY [Quietly]
Mother—not now—not now—it's all wrong. Control yourself! Bunty — Bunty —do go to bed—please.
[He goes to the piano and begins to play jazz.]
BUNTY
All right— Tom ——
[Florence goes to the fireplace, trembling with rage. Nicky goes on playing. Tom and Bunty go towards the stairs.]
FLORENCE
Stop—I want an explanation, please!
BUNTY
How dare you speak to me like that?
FLORENCE
Get out of my house! Get out of my house!
BUNTY
This is disgusting!
TOM
I say, Florence ——
FLORENCE
Get out of my house!
BUNTY
I shall leave the first thing in the morning; it's much too late to-night.
[She goes off.]
[Nicky never stops playing for a moment.]
FLORENCE
Tom. [He goes towards her, absolutely silent.]
You kissed her—you kissed her—I saw you!——
TOM
Yes.
FLORENCE
In this house!
TOM
Yes, Florence. I apologize.
FLORENCE
Apologize! You're beneath contempt. Never speak to me again, never touch me again—I hate you!
TOM
Look here, Florence —I'm desperately sorry. You see, I'm afraid I love her.

FLORENCE [Hysterically]
You dare to stand there and say that to me? It's incredible—after all I've done for you—after all we've been to each other. Love! You don't know what it

means. You've lied to me—all these months. It's contemptible and humiliating. Get out of my sight!
TOM [Turning and going upstairs]
Very well.
FLORENCE [Suddenly realizing that he is gone]
Tom — Tom —come back—come back!——
[She runs upstairs after him. Nicky at last stops playing and lets his hands drop from the keys.]

Curtain

INTERMISSION

ACT III

The scene is Florence's bedroom the same night. About two hours have elapsed. When the curtain rises Florence is lying face downwards on the bed; she is dressed in a very beautiful but slightly exotic negligée.
Helen is standing by the window, fully dressed; she is holding the curtain aside, and a bar of moonlight comes in to mingle with the amber of the dressing-table lights. Florence is obviously extremely hysterical.
HELEN
Florence, what is the use of going on like that?
FLORENCE
I wish I were dead!
HELEN
It's so cowardly to give way utterly—as you're doing.
FLORENCE
I don't care—I don't care!
HELEN
If you don't face things in this world, they only hit you much harder in the end.
FLORENCE
He loved me—he adored me!
HELEN
Never! He hadn't got it in him.
FLORENCE
After all I've done for him, to go to—to Bunty!
HELEN
[Leaving the window]
If it hadn't been Bunty it would have been someone else—don't you see how inevitable it was?
FLORENCE
How dared they!—Here!—In this house!
HELEN
That's a little thing; it doesn't matter at all.
FLORENCE
It does—it does——
HELEN
Florence, sit up and pull yourself together.
FLORENCE [Sitting up slowly]
I think I'm going mad.
HELEN
Not a bit of it; you're just thoroughly hysterical.
FLORENCE
Give me some water.
[**HELEN** goes to the bathroom and returns with a glass of water.]
FLORENCE [Taking it]
What time is it?
HELEN [Looking at her watch]

Ten past one.

FLORENCE

Don't go to London by the early train, Hele; stay and come up with me in the car.

HELEN

Very well.

FLORENCE

Thank God, you were here!

HELEN

I wish I'd known what was happening; I might have done something.

FLORENCE

What can I do to get him back?

HELEN

Don't be silly.

FLORENCE

What can I do—what can I do?——

HELEN

Do you mean to say you'd take him back after to-night?

FLORENCE

No, never. Not if he crawled to me—never——

HELEN

Well, then, make up your mind definitely never to see him again whatever happens.

FLORENCE

Yes—I will.

HELEN

Why don't you go to bed now?

FLORENCE

I couldn't sleep.

HELEN

Put it all out of your mind—make an effort.

FLORENCE

I can't—I'm too unhappy.

HELEN

Think of Nicky.

FLORENCE

Nicky's young.

HELEN

That doesn't make it any better for him.

FLORENCE

He'll get over it in the long run.

HELEN

The long run never counts at the moment.

FLORENCE

He wasn't in love—really?

HELEN

As much as either you or he are capable of it.

FLORENCE

He's well rid of her. She'd never have appreciated him properly—she hasn't the intelligence.

HELEN

I don't agree with you there—she's got intelligence right enough.

FLORENCE

Treacherous little beast!

HELEN

Yes, but far-seeing.

FLORENCE

Are you standing up for her? Do you think it was right of her to get Tom away from me?

HELEN

Yes, quite right.

FLORENCE
Helen!
HELEN
To do her justice, she didn't deliberately set herself out to get him away from you at all. She discovered that in spite of the somewhat decadent years Tom was still her type, and likely to remain so. So with common sense she decided to shelve Nicky forthwith and go for him.
FLORENCE
Her type indeed!
HELEN
Yes, she'd have been quite a nice girl really if she'd been left alone and not allowed to go to Paris and get into the wrong set.
FLORENCE
You are extraordinary, Helen. Do you realize that you're making excuses for the girl who's betrayed your best friend?
HELEN
Don't be so utterly absurd. I'm not making excuses, and, anyhow, she hasn't betrayed you. She hardly knows you, in the first place, and she's just followed her instincts regardless of anyone else's feelings—as you've done thousands of times.
FLORENCE
Helen —you're being horrible to me!
HELEN
I'm not, I'm trying to make you see! You're battering your head against silly cast-iron delusions, and I want to dislodge them.
FLORENCE
Helen, I'm so unhappy—so desperately unhappy.
HELEN
Yes, but not because you've lost Tom; it's something far deeper than that.
FLORENCE
What then?
HELEN
You're on the wrong tack and have been for years.
FLORENCE
I don't understand.
HELEN
You won't understand!
[Florence gets off the bed and goes over to the dressing-table. She sits and stares at herself in the glass for a moment without speaking.]
FLORENCE
My eyes are sore. [She powders her face and sprays a little scent on her hair.] It's so lovely this—and so refreshing.
HELEN
I think I'll go to bed now.
FLORENCE
No, wait a little longer with me—please, Helen —just a few minutes.
HELEN
It's so hot in here.
FLORENCE
Open the window then.
HELEN
All right.

[She goes to the window and opens it. Florence takes a cigarette out of a box and then shakes a scent-bottle and rubs the cigarette lightly with the stopper.]

FLORENCE

Do you ever do this? It's divine.

HELEN

What a wonderfully clear night. You can see the hills right across the valley—the moon's quite strong.

[Florence goes to the window and stands next to Helen, looking out—she is puffing her cigarette.]

FLORENCE

I chose this room in the first place because the view was so lovely.

HELEN

Do you ever look at it?

FLORENCE [Listlessly]

Of course I do, often!

HELEN

It's been raining. I wish you'd throw away that cigarette—it spoils the freshness.

FLORENCE [Turning away]

It's soothing me—calming my nerves.

HELEN

I do wish I could help you—really!

FLORENCE

You are helping me, darling—you're being an angel.

HELEN [Suddenly angry]

Don't talk so emptily, Florence; I'm worth more than that.

FLORENCE

I don't know what you mean.

HELEN

It sickens me to see you getting back so soon.

FLORENCE

Getting back?

HELEN

Yes, to your usual worthless attitude of mind.

FLORENCE

Helen!

HELEN

A little while ago you were really suffering for once, and in a way I was glad because it showed you were capable of a genuine emotion. Now you're glossing it over—swarming it down with your returning vanity; soon you won't be unhappy anymore—just vindictive.

FLORENCE

Don't go on at me like that—I'm too wretched.

HELEN [Going to her]

Florence dear, forgive me, but it's true—and I don't want it to be.

[The door opens and Nicky enters. He is in dressing-gown and Pyjamas. His face looks strained and white.]

FLORENCE

Nicky!

NICKY

Helen, I want to talk to mother, please.

HELEN

All right, Nicky.

FLORENCE

What is it?

NICKY

I couldn't sleep.

HELEN

Florence dear—good night.

FLORENCE
No—no, Helen —don't go yet——
HELEN
I must.
FLORENCE
Helen—stay with me.
NICKY
Please go.
HELEN
I can't stay, Florence —it's quite impossible.
[She goes out.]
FLORENCE
I don't know what you mean—by coming here and ordering Helen out of my room.
NICKY
I'm sorry, mother. I felt I had to talk to you alone.
FLORENCE
At this hour of the night? You're mad!
NICKY
No, I'm not; I think I'm probably more unhappy than I've ever been in my life.
FLORENCE
You're young—you'll get over it.
NICKY
I hope so.
FLORENCE
I knew the first moment I saw her—what sort of a girl she was.
NICKY
Oh, mother!
FLORENCE
It's true. I had an instinct about her.
NICKY
It's all been rather a shock, you know——
FLORENCE [Becoming motherly]
Yes, dear—I know—I know—but you mustn't be miserable about her; she isn't worth it. [She goes to kiss him.]
NICKY [Gently pushing her away]
Don't, mother!
FLORENCE
Listen, Nicky. Go back to bed now—there's a dear; my head's splitting.
NICKY
I can't yet.
FLORENCE
Take some aspirin; that'll calm your nerves.
NICKY
I'm afraid I'm a little beyond aspirin.
FLORENCE
I don't want you to think I don't sympathize with you, darling—my heart aches for you—I know so well what you're going through.
NICKY
Do you?
FLORENCE
It's agony—absolute agony—but you see—it will wear off—it always does in time. [Nicky doesn't answer.]
Nicky, please go now!
NICKY
I want to talk to you.
FLORENCE
To-morrow—we'll talk to-morrow.
NICKY

No, now—now!
FLORENCE
You're inconsiderate and cruel—I've told you my head's bursting.
NICKY
I want to sympathize with you, too—and try to understand everything—as well as I can——
FLORENCE
Understand everything?
NICKY
Yes, please.
FLORENCE
I don't know what you mean——
NICKY
Will you tell me things—as though I were somebody quite different?
FLORENCE
What kind of things?
NICKY
Things about you—your life.
FLORENCE
Really, Nicky—you're ridiculous—asking me to tell you stories at this hour!
NICKY [With dead vehemence]
Mother—sit down quietly. I'm not going out of this room until I've got everything straight in my mind.
[Florence [Sinking down—almost hypnotized]
FLORENCE
Nicky—please—I——
NICKY
Tom Veryan has been your lover, hasn't he?
FLORENCE [Almost shrieking]
Nicky—how dare you!
NICKY
Keep calm—it's our only chance—keep calm.
Florence [Bursting into tears]
How dare you speak to me like that—suggest such a thing! I——
NICKY
It's true, isn't it?
FLORENCE
Go away—go away!
NICKY
It's true, isn't it?
FLORENCE
No—no!
NICKY
It's true, isn't it?
FLORENCE
No—I tell you—no—no—no!
NICKY
You're lying to me, mother. What's the use of that?
FLORENCE
You're mad—mad——
NICKY
Does father know?
FLORENCE
Go away!
NICKY
Does father know?
FLORENCE
Your father knows nothing—he doesn't understand me any more than you do.
NICKY

Then it's between us alone.

FLORENCE

I tell you I don't know what you're talking about.

NICKY

Mother—don't go on like that; it's useless. We've arrived at a crisis; wherever we go—whatever we do we can't escape from it. I know we're neither of us very strong-minded or capable, and we haven't much hope of coming through successfully—but let's try. It's no good pretending anymore—our lives are built up of pretenses all the time. For years—ever since I began to think at all, I've been bolstering up my illusions about you. People have made remarks, not realizing that I was your son, and I've pretended that they were inspired by cattiness and jealousy. I've noticed things—trivial incriminating little incidents, and I've brushed them aside and not thought any more about them because you were my mother—clever and beautiful and successful—and naturally people would slander you because you were so beautiful—and now I know—they were right!

FLORENCE

Nicky—I implore you—go away now—leave me alone.

NICKY

No, I can't.

FLORENCE

You're cruel—cruel to torment me——

NICKY

I don't want to be cruel——

FLORENCE

Go to bed then, and we'll talk everything over quietly another time.

NICKY

It is true about Tom Veryan, isn't it?

FLORENCE

No. No——

NICKY

We're on awfully dangerous ground. I'm straining every nerve to keep myself under control. If you lie to me and try to evade me any more—I won't be answerable for what might happen.

FLORENCE [Dropping her voice—terrified]

What do you mean?

NICKY

I don't know—I'm frightened.

FLORENCE

Nicky—darling Nicky—I——

[She approaches him.]

NICKY

Don't touch me, please.

FLORENCE

Have a little pity for me.

NICKY

Was Tom Veryan your lover?

FLORENCE [In a whisper]

Yes.

NICKY

I want to understand why——

FLORENCE

He loved me.

NICKY

But you—did you love him?

FLORENCE

Yes.

NICKY
It was something you couldn't help, wasn't it—something that's always been the same in you since you were quite, quite young?——
FLORENCE
Yes, Nicky—yes——
NICKY
And there have been others, too, haven't there?
FLORENCE [With her face in her hands]
I won't be cross-questioned any more—I won't—I won't——
NICKY
I wish you'd understand I'm not blaming you—I'm trying to help you—to help us both——
FLORENCE
What good can all this possibly do?
NICKY
Clear things up, of course. I can't go on any more half knowing——
FLORENCE
Why should that side of my life be any concern of yours?
NICKY
But mother!
FLORENCE
I'm different from other women—completely different—and you expect me to be the same. Why can't you realize that with a temperament like mine it's impossible to live an ordinary humdrum life. You're not a boy any longer—you're a man—and——
NICKY
I'm nothing—I've grown up all wrong.
FLORENCE
It's not my fault.
NICKY
Of course it's your fault, mother—who else's fault could it be?
FLORENCE
Your friends—the people you mix with——
NICKY
It wouldn't matter who I mixed with if only I had a background.
FLORENCE
You've got as much money as you want—you've got your home——
NICKY [Bitterly]
Home! That's almost funny—there's no peace anywhere—nothing but the ceaseless din of trying to be amused——
FLORENCE
David never complains.
NICKY
I don't suppose you've looked at father during the last few years—or you wouldn't say that.
FLORENCE
He's perfectly happy because he's sensible—he lives his own life and doesn't try to interfere with mine.
NICKY
It must be your vanity that makes you so dreadfully blind—and foolish.
FLORENCE
Understand once and for all, I won't be spoken to like this——
NICKY

You've had other lovers besides Tom Veryan—haven't you?

FLORENCE

Yes, I have—I have. Now then!

NICKY

Well, anyhow—that's the truth—at last——

[He rises, turns his back on her and stands looking out of the window.]

Florence [After a pause—going to him]

NICKY—don't be angry—please don't be angry with me.

NICKY

I'm not angry a bit. I realize that I'm living in a world where things like this happen—and they've got to be faced and given the right value. If only I'd had the courage to realize everything before—it wouldn't be so bad now. It's the sudden shock that's thrown the whole thing out of focus for me—but I mean to get it right. Please help me!

FLORENCE [Dully]

I don't know what to do.

NICKY

It's your life, and you've lived it as you've wanted to live it—that's fair——

FLORENCE

Yes—yes.

NICKY

You've wanted love always—passionate love, because you were made like that. It's not your fault—it's the fault of circumstances and civilization; civilization makes rottenness so much easier. We're utterly rotten—both of us——

FLORENCE

Nicky—don't—don't——

NICKY

How can we help ourselves? We swirl about in a vortex of beastliness. This is a chance—don't you see—to realize the truth—our only chance.

FLORENCE

Oh, Nicky, do stop—go away!

NICKY

Don't keep on telling me to stop when our only hope is to hammer it out.

FLORENCE

You're overwrought. It isn't as bad as you think.

NICKY

Isn't it?

FLORENCE

No, no. Of course it isn't. To-morrow morning you'll see things quite differently.

NICKY

You haven't understood.

FLORENCE

Yes, I have—I have.

NICKY

You haven't understood. Oh, my God, you haven't understood! You're building up silly defenses in your mind. I'm overwrought. Tomorrow morning I shall see things quite differently. That's true—that's the tragedy of it, and you won't see. Tomorrow morning I shall see things quite differently. All this will seem unreal—a nightmare—the machinery of our lives will go on again and gloss over the truth as it always does—and our chance will be gone forever.

FLORENCE
Chance—chance? What are you talking about—what chance?
NICKY
I must make you see, somehow.
FLORENCE
You're driving me mad.
NICKY
Have patience with me—please—please——
FLORENCE [Wildly]
How can I have patience with you? You exaggerate everything.
NICKY
No, I don't—I wish I did.
FLORENCE
Listen—let me explain something to you.
NICKY
Very well—go on.
FLORENCE
You're setting yourself up in judgment on me—your own mother.
NICKY
No, I'm not.
FLORENCE
You are—you are. Let me speak. You don't understand my temperament in the least—nobody does—I——
NICKY
You're deceiving yourself—your temperament's no different from thousands of other women, but you've been weak and selfish and given way all along the line——
FLORENCE
Let me speak, I tell you!——
NICKY
What's the use? You're still pretending—you're building up barriers between us instead of helping me to break them down.
FLORENCE
What are you accusing me of having done?
NICKY
Can't you see yet?
FLORENCE
No, I can't. If you're preaching morality, you've no right to. That's my affair—I've never done any harm to anyone.
NICKY
Look at me.
FLORENCE
Why—what do you mean?
NICKY
You've given me nothing all my life—nothing that counts.
FLORENCE
Now you're pitying yourself.
NICKY
Yes, with every reason.
FLORENCE
You're neurotic and ridiculous. Just because Bunty broke off your engagement you come and say wicked, cruel things to me——
NICKY
You forget what I've seen to-night, mother.
FLORENCE

I don't care what you've seen.

NICKY

I've seen you make a vulgar, disgusting scene in your own house, and on top of that humiliate yourself before a boy half your age. The misery of losing Bunty faded away when that happened—everything is comparative, after all.

FLORENCE

I didn't humiliate myself——

NICKY

You ran after him up the stairs because your vanity wouldn't let you lose him. It isn't that you love him—that would be easier—you never love anyone, you only love them loving you—all your so-called passion and temperament is false—your whole existence had degenerated into an endless empty craving for admiration and flattery—and then you say you've done no harm to anybody. Father used to be a clever man, with a strong will and a capacity for enjoying everything—I can remember him like that—and now he's nothing—a complete nonentity because his spirit's crushed. How could it be otherwise? You've let him down consistently for years—and God knows I'm nothing for him to look forward to—but I might have been if it hadn't been for you——

FLORENCE

Don't talk like that. Don't—don't. It can't be such a crime being loved—it can't be such a crime being happy——

NICKY

You're not happy—you're never happy—you're fighting—fighting all the time to keep your youth and your looks—because you can't bear the thought of living without them—as though they mattered in the end.

FLORENCE [Hysterically]

What does anything matter—ever?

NICKY

That's what I'm trying to find out.

FLORENCE

I'm still young inside—I'm still beautiful. Why shouldn't I live my life as I choose?

NICKY

You're not young or beautiful; I'm seeing for the first time how old you are. It's horrible—your silly fair hair—and your face all plastered and painted——

FLORENCE

Nicky —Nicky—stop—stop—stop!

[She flings herself face downwards on the bed. Nicky goes over to her.]

NICKY

Mother!

FLORENCE

Go away—go away—I hate you—go away——

NICKY

Mother—sit up——

FLORENCE [Pulling herself together]

Go out of my room——

NICKY

Mother——

FLORENCE

I don't ever want to see you again—you're insane—you've said wicked, wicked things to me—you've

talked to me as though I were a woman off the streets. I can't bear any more—I can't bear any more!

NICKY

I have a slight confession to make——

FLORENCE

Confession?

NICKY

Yes.

FLORENCE

Go away—go away——

NICKY [Taking a small gold box from his pocket]

Look——

FLORENCE

What do you mean—what is it——?

NICKY

Don't you know?

[Florence takes the box of Cocaine with trembling fingers and opens it. She stares at it for a moment. When she speaks again her voice is quite dead.]

FLORENCE

Nicky, it isn't—you haven't—— been using that?

NICKY

Why do you look so shocked?

FLORENCE [Dully]

Oh, my God!

NICKY

What does it matter?

[Florence suddenly rises and hurls the box out of the window.]

That doesn't make it any better.

FLORENCE [Flinging herself on her knees beside him]

Nicky, promise me, oh, promise you'll never do it again—never in your life—it's frightful—horrible——

NICKY

It's only just the beginning.

FLORENCE

What can I say to you—what can I say to you?

NICKY

Nothing—under the circumstances.

FLORENCE

What do you mean?

NICKY

It can't possibly matter—now.

FLORENCE

Matter—but it's the finish of everything—you're young, you're just starting on your life—you must stop—you must swear never to touch it again—swear to me on your oath, Nicky—I'll help you—I'll help you——

NICKY

You!

[He turns away.]

FLORENCE

[Burying her face in her hands and moaning]

Oh—oh—oh!

NICKY

How could you possibly help me?

FLORENCE

[Clutching him]

Nicky!

NICKY [Almost losing control]

Shut up—shut up—don't touch me——

FLORENCE

[Trying to take him in her arms]

NICKY
I'm trying to control myself, but you won't let me—you're an awfully rotten woman, really.
FLORENCE
Nicky—stop—stop—stop——
[She beats him with her fists.]
NICKY
Leave go of me!
[He breaks away from her and going up to the dressing-table he sweeps everything off on to the floor with his arm.]
FLORENCE [Screaming]
Oh—oh—Nicky——!
NICKY
Now then! Now then! You're not to have any more lovers; you're not going to be beautiful and successful ever again—you're going to be my mother for once—it's about time I had one to help me, before I go over the edge altogether——
FLORENCE
My son, My son.... My SON!
NICKY
Promise me to be different—you've got to promise me!
FLORENCE [Sinking on to the end of couch, facing audience]
Yes—yes—I promise—— [The tears are running down her face.]
NICKY
I love you, really—that's why it's so awful.
[He falls on his knees by her side and buries his face in her lap.]
FLORENCE
No. No, not awful—don't say that—I love you, too.
NICKY [Sobbing hopelessly]
Oh, mother——!
FLORENCE [Staring in front of her]
I wish I were dead!
NICKY
It doesn't matter about death, but it matters terribly about life.
FLORENCE
I know——
NICKY [Desperately]
Promise me you'll be different—promise me you'll be different——
FLORENCE
Yes, yes—I'll try——
NICKY
We'll both try.
FLORENCE
Yes, dear.—Oh, my dear——!
[She sits quite still, staring in front of her—the tears are rolling down her cheeks, and she is stroking Nicky's hair mechanically in an effort to calm him.]

Curtain